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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#)
SUBJECT: UNION OF SOLDIERS' MOTHERS SEES LITTLE PROGRESS

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Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Executive Secretary of the Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committee in Russia Valentina Melnikova told us that, despite her organization's efforts, the lives of soldiers in the Russian military has not changed very much in the past year. What her organization has achieved, she argued, is to bring greater media attention to soldiers' issues such as hazing and the housing shortage. The Russian military protects officers who abuse conscript soldiers, and this inhibits accountability and reform. Melnikova argued that moving to an all-volunteer army would greatly improve the current situation, as contract soldiers would fight for their rights more effectively than draftees. End Summary.

Little Improvement Save the Openness

12. (C) In a recent meeting, Melnikova credited her organization's efforts to bring the plight of Russian soldiers out into the open with forcing the MoD to take at least some steps, such as the new law on military conscription, to address problems such as hazing in the military.

13. (C) According to Melnikova, conscripts suffer many of the same forms of abuse as were reported in the press a year ago. Conscripts serve as slave labor to build dachas for high-ranking officers, are regularly beaten by other conscripts, and sometimes are forced into prostitution. Despite the increased media scrutiny, Melnikova lamented, little progress has been made in eradicating these practices from the Russian military.

14. (C) While accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, Melnikova told us her organization received approximately 3,500 complaints of hazing in 2007. MoD reported that in 2007 22 military servicemen were killed in hazing incidents, down from 33 deaths in 2006. Many observers, however, including Melnikova, point to the high level of suicide among conscripts - totaling 208 in 2007 - as another reflection of the pervasion of hazing in the military.

15. (C) In addition to hazing, Russian soldiers face a shortage of housing. According to Melnikova, even officers have dormitory-like accommodations, with four or more soldiers living in one apartment. Sometimes soldiers live in libraries, warehouses, or any other available space. The MoD has made little headway in addressing this issue, she said.

16. (C) Melnikova complained that one of the major barriers to reform is that the military often protects officers who allow hazing to happen in their ranks. Even officers who

personally beat conscripts are not disciplined, she said. Soldiers who use conscript soldiers as slave labor draw even fewer rebukes. The military will often excuse the behavior by arguing the officer has a family and has served in the military well.

Role of Union of Soldiers' Mothers Limited

17. (C) Aleksandr Belkin, Deputy Executive Director of the Council On Foreign and Defense Policy, agreed that the Union of Soldiers' Mothers has played an important role in the recent military reforms. He added, however, that the MoD was already aware of the problems facing the military and was taking steps to address them. The Union of Soldiers' Mothers drew public attention to these problems and did not allow the MoD to ignore them as it had previously done. Belkin added that the Kremlin has limited the effectiveness of the Union of Soldiers' Mothers by inviting Melnikova to join the Public Chamber of the MoD, thereby institutionalizing her opposition (reftel).

Are Contract Soldiers The Answer?

18. (C) Melnikova argued the best way to solve the problems facing the Russian military is to stop drafting young men to join the army and move to an all-volunteer, "contract" army. Conscript soldiers have no rights, she argued, and sometimes cannot even call home, despite provisions in the law providing for that. Contract soldiers, she argued, will not volunteer to join an army that abuses them. They will assertively push for their rights, she argued.

19. (C) Belkin agreed that hazing would decrease as Russia moved to a professional army, but noted that the problem was a societal, not a military one. Aleksandr Golts, Deputy Editor-In-Chief of the Weekly Journal, however, contended that hazing would continue since it was "a wild, but simple, way to keep discipline," and since the MoD had no effective professional NCO corps, it had no other way to keep the troops in line.

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